Personnel Management Reforms in Japanese Supermarkets: The Positional Warfare and Limited Assimilation of Conversational Communities

Young KIM*

The Japanese general merchandising stores (GMS) industry has, in the 2000s, introduced new personnel management policies based on the principle of determining employee status and treatment according to ‘working conditions rather than employment arrangements’. This paper analyzes the substance and features of the new policies, as well as the factors underlying such policy reforms. By focusing on micropolitics at the workplace level, this paper highlights the possibility that the unofficial power of part-timers may underlie these reforms. The Japanese supermarket industry has increasingly been relying on the transformation of part-time employees into their main workforce both in volume and in substance in order to reduce labor costs. In the supermarket industry, these new personnel management policies serve both to contain the unofficial power of part-time employees through a limited assimilation of core part-timers and to stabilize the profit structure. In addition, the new policies, which offer preferential treatment to employees who are able to accept transfers involving changes of residence, reinforce the gender differentiation that previously adhered to the underside of employment arrangements while weakening notions of differential status based on employment arrangements.

1. Introduction

In many countries, including Japan, there has been a notable trend toward de-normalizing the labor force and relying on part-time employees. This is the result of attempts by businesses to reduce costs in order to compete viably against the increasingly stiff competition they face within the expanding global economy. In 2005, part-time laborers in Japan constituted 24.0% of the overall labor force and 40.6% of all female labor force (Management and Coordination Agency, Statistics Bureau). The part-time labor market in Japan is characterized by the simultaneous development of two features: the increasing transformation of part-time employees into main employees and an expanding salary gap between part-time and full-time employees. This phenomenon means an increase in experienced part-time employees embedded in a company, but whose salary gap nevertheless is expanding vis-à-vis regular employees. In the case of female employees—according to the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare—if we count a full-time employee’s salary as 100, the part-timer’s salary has dropped from 76.2 in 1980 to 65.7 in 2004 (predetermined salary not including bonuses). This macro trend, while at first contradictory, can also be observed at the company level. According to case

Young KIM is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Pusan National University, Korea. Over the past 10 years, she has conducted research on Japan’s part-time labor market, focusing on the gender system and the strategic behavior of its agents. She can be contacted by e-mail at borninsurge@pusan.ac.kr.

*All undocumented quotes are from the author’s personal interviews. I want to express gratitude to all my interviewees. This article was translated from the Japanese by Lili Selden.
studies of chain stores, the occupational field of part-timers has expanded continuously, and the number of part-timers charged with managerial positions has increased. As the case studies reveal, however, the compensation scale has not adequately reflected those increased responsibilities (Honda 2002; Kamuro 2003). Such developments have resulted in social and scholarly debate regarding their treatment in terms of salary, benefits and the work conditions of part-time employees. The debate has, in turn, led to scholarly investigation into whether the situation calls for ‘equivalent’ treatment or ‘balanced’ treatment, what kind of rational standards can be established for either equivalent or balanced treatment and so on (Mizumachi 1997; Osawa 1997; Wakizaka and Matsubara 2003; Asakura 2004). In August 2003, the government revised national guidelines for part-time employees by stipulating that treatment of part-time employees ‘take into consideration the balance relative to regular employees’, and in April 2007, it revised the Part-Time Work Law (Pâto Rôdô Hô).

The general merchandising store (GMS) industry in Japan, in responding to these changes, is drawing attention for its introduction of personnel management policies that conform to the standards of determining status and treatment within companies according to ‘working conditions rather than employment arrangements’, and of thereby shifting toward ‘balanced’ treatment across different employment arrangements (JILPT 2005). Moreover, labor unions in the industry are also devoting themselves to organizing part-time employees in order to protect them and stabilize their employment conditions. Within the industry sector, part-time labor constitutes the main labor force both in volume and in substance, and thus, not only is it ideologically just to make these rational changes, but it will also increase the understanding of employees regarding their treatment, thus contributing toward more stable profit-generating structures for the industry.

Favorable treatment in the industry previously depended so thoroughly on employment arrangement as to cause it to be termed a class system. What kind of transformations, then, will result from the above policy reforms? The answer is far from simple. Although, as will be demonstrated below, a considerable number of regular employees have become part-timers due to the overhauling of these policies, most of these employees are women, and even with the institution of such reforms, the majority of part-timers continue not to benefit from ‘treatment that takes into consideration balance vis-à-vis regular employees’. Why, then, does the apparently more rational system of treating employees ‘according to working conditions instead of employment arrangement’ produce such results?

This paper answers the question by analyzing both the content and the characteristics of the revised personnel management policies, as well as the background causes of the revisions. In particular, this paper focuses on the workplace micropolitics that have resulted from the simultaneous development of the transformation of part-time labor into the main workforce and the wage gap between regular employees and part-timers. In previous research, part-timers have tended to be viewed either as highly satisfied employees who voluntarily elect to work shorter hours or under atypical working conditions, or as one-sided victims of disparities in the workforce structure. This article, which transcends those perspectives, draws a link between the fact that the strategic actions of unorganized individual subjects have induced reforms to company personnel management policies and that these strategic actions have gone so far as to influence the very structure of the labor market.

2. Methodology and Data
The main research methods of this article involve workplace surveys, including interviews. From June 1999 until September 2007, the author conducted surveys of seven GMS companies (Companies G1–G7) and four produce supermarkets (SM; Companies S1–S4) (three or more times surveys
were conducted with each of the Companies G1–G4 and S1–S4). Excluding Companies G5–G7, I designated one store for case study at each of the eight companies. In addition, I conducted interviews with three employees and a union official at one store in Company G6 and with the director of human resources and union officials at Company G5 (at Company G7, I interviewed only union officials). As indicated in Table 1, a total of 146 individuals were interviewed at these companies, including both a broad range of employees working in a variety of positions, from human resource supervisors to part-time workers at the stores, as well as union leaders (from superior bodies and local unions). Interviews were conducted primarily one-on-one using in-depth interview methods, and many subjects were contacted numerous additional times for follow-up research through phone calls, e-mails, drinking sessions, home visits and other means. Especially with regard to the case studies for this paper, Companies G1 and S1, I conducted a sustained examination that centered on the labor unions. Besides carrying out interviews, I conducted questionnaire surveys targeted at married, female employees at 14 supermarket companies (eight GMS companies and six SM companies; 575 part-time employees and 247 regular employees responded in 1999 to my national survey; Kim 2001).

This paper analyzes the personnel management policies at Companies G1 and S1. Other than G4 and G7, the case study GMS businesses effected broad policy reforms in 2000. In particular, Company G1, whose policy is to consider employee transferability as the sole standard for hiring classification and treatment, has a distinctly ideal approach. The reason I selected Company S1 for analysis is that it is possible to view its personnel management policies as the model for major GMS reforms. In other words, the case of Company S1 is significant as an early corollary to reforms enacted within the GMS industry.

---

1. Through my many years of investigation, I have determined that the revised personnel management policies at GMS companies and Company S1 are uniform. In 2001, I accompanied Company G5 union leaders (Company G5 underwent policy reforms in 2002) to listen to an explanation by the Company S1 union regarding Company S1’s policies. Moreover, at the ‘Roundtable on the Distribution Service Industry’ (11 July 2004) sponsored by the Japan Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development, Companies G1 and S1 were categorized as having the same kind of policies in common.

---

Table 1. Distribution of Interviewee Rank within Companies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Companies G1 and S1</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stores</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-timers</td>
<td>12 (0)a</td>
<td>50 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank-and-file employees and supervisors</td>
<td>8 (3)</td>
<td>25 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General managers and store managers</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td>20 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Headquarters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources staff</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>16 (13)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union officials</td>
<td>6 (6)</td>
<td>35 (28)c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>34 (17)</td>
<td>146 (70)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aParentheses indicate number of men.
bHuman resources staff essentially includes the director and assistant director of human resources. However, at Company G2, I interviewed not only the managers but also three female staff members of the human resources department.
cThese included 11 union officials from the superior body.
3. The Core Substance and Aims of the Revised Policies

The aim of personnel management policy reform within the case industry was ‘to change standards for company employee classifications’ and ‘to expand the upper limits of promotion and advancement for non-transferable company employees’.

What is meant by ‘changing the standards for company employee classifications’ is that employees are classified according to ‘whether or not they are able to accept transfers involving changes of address, as well as the scope of those transfers’. Following policy reforms, G1 employees were divided into three categories: N employees prepared to be transferred throughout Japan, R employees prepared for transfer within a certain number of prefectures and C employees whose transfers cannot involve changes of address. Under the old policies, regular employees who did not accept transfers involving changes of address were classified as L employees; the C employees of the current system comprise a grouping that combines the former L employees and former part-time employees. Due to changes in the classification standards, approximately 1,800 of Company G1’s former L employees have been converted into the new C employees, of which 91.7% (1,650 people) are women.

At the same time, the policies at Company S1 classify its employees into N employees, A employees and S employees depending on the distance they can be transferred and the number of hours worked. N employees can be transferred throughout the country, while A employees transfer locally only. However, Company S1 is a regional company, and 60% of its stores are located in one prefecture (in 1994 when the current system was introduced, over 90% of its stores were in one prefecture). S employees are further divided into E part-timers (7.5 hours), P part-timers (6.5 hours) and H part-timers (6 hours or less), with all three types working five days a week. E part-timers can be transferred between stores and also work staggered shifts, including night shifts and holidays.

It should be noted here that prior to the policy reforms, the category of nonregular employee or part-timer did not exist as formal appellations. Nonregular employee, or part-timer, was merely a conventional category that companies used to indicate differences in treatment toward employees. Following the reforms, as well, employees have been divided in common parlance into regular and part-time employees. In addition, the label ‘part-time’ does not have any relation to whether an employee works long or short hours. In Company G1’s pre-reform system, ‘Career employee’ meant that the part-timers most relied on by the company and their annual number of hours worked exceeded those of regular employees.

Next, let us examine ‘the expansion of the upper limits of promotion and advancement for non-transferable employees’. Formerly, the promotion and advancement of non-transferable employees were limited to attaining section head status. As indicated in Figure 1, as a result of the reforms, currently they may advance to the level of store manager at small and mid-size stores. With the pre-reform personnel management policies, transfer parameters and advancement were interlocked, and at Company G1, N employees could advance to the highest Grade 11 (current ES) management levels, R employees to Grade 8 (current M2 or M3) department heads or assistant store manager and L employees to Grade 5 (current J3) section heads. Part-timers were ineligible for appointment to such positions.

However, due to the progress made in turning part-timers into main employees, an increasing number of part-timers were discharging in essence—but without being given titles—the responsibilities of store section heads or deputy section heads. For that reason, in 1999 a part-time employee section head policy was introduced principally with respect to small and mid-size stores. By the end of 1999, Company G1 had approximately 100 part-time section heads (and approximately 500 assistant section heads), and by somewhere around the end of 2003 this number had increased to approximately 300. Moreover, for three years starting in 2002, the company put a stop to new hires of regular
employees but continued to open new stores, and even further numbers of part-timers were turned into core workers. As noted by a personnel manager at the company, ‘with these current policy reforms, we aimed to be realistic’; the ‘expansion of the upper limits of promotion and advancement for nontransferable employees’ constitutes the institutionalization of such circumstances.

Essentially, the core of Company G1’s policy reforms is comprised of the conversion of regular employees, who are nontransferable (L employees), into the same category as part-timers and the maximization of their use. If that is indeed the case, what kind of results can the company anticipate once these policies have taken root? The current state of Company S1 offers an answer. Figure 2 presents the employment arrangements of sales area supervisors (department and section managers) in the company’s organizational chart for its standard stores. According to Company S1’s store operations policies, the store manager and sales area supervisors other than the perishable foodstuffs

---

2. Company G1 primarily has GMS stores, but it also has numerous SM stores. The small and mid-size stores mentioned here are SM stores.
department supervisor are normally assigned from among E part-timers. However, in the case of the clothing and home section managers and the lifestyle department general manager, part-timers and regular employees are mixed together in order to maximize the flexibility of sales area operations through the active transfer of employees from store to store. As of August 2003, Company S1 has had at each of its stores an average of 0.7 E part-time employees who are general managers and 3.2 section managers. Of its E part-timers, 42.1% have positions at the section manager level or higher and 24.8% have positions at the assistant section manager level. Company S1 plans to have realized the organizational structure delineated in Figure 2 in all of its stores by the year 2013 or 2014.

What, precisely, was the key to Company S1’s ability to fortify its E part-timers to this extent? The secret lies in the fact that 60% of the company’s E part-timers, and nearly all of its titled E part-timers, formerly were female regular employees. The reason they converted to part-timer status almost always lies in marriage or childbirth. In addition, when these women convert to E part-time employment, their salaries are adjusted individually based on evaluation by store managers; due to the switch from regular employee to part-timer, this adjustment is downward. As of August 2003, the percentage of E part-timers at Company S1 is slightly more than 50% of all the regular employees, and the number of female E part-timers is just under four times the number of all female regular employees.

4. Factors Underlying Policy Reforms
Why, then, did companies decide to execute these policy reforms? Because the core of the new policies is linked to the treatment and use of nontransferable employees, it can be surmised that behind the
reforms lie factors related to these employees, who are female. Let us approach the question through an analysis of the two groups that constitute nontransferable employees, that is, female regular employees and homemaker part-time employees.

4.1 Cost Burden and the Dangers of Employee Integration

At the time of the policy reforms, Company G1’s regular employees were 35% female, and of those female regular employees, just under 40% were L employees (more than 90% of L employees overall were female). From about the mid-1990s, the company prohibited new hires from electing to be L employees. For that reason in 1999, among female regular employees in their twenties, over 80% are N and R employees, while among female regular employees in their thirties and beyond, there is a much higher percentage of L employees. In addition, among female regular employees, only 4.2% have attained the Grade 6 and higher status that exceeds the upper limit for advancement of L employees. In contrast, 52% have achieved the Grade 4 status of deputy section heads and persons in charge and 35.5% are Grade 5 section heads. That is, most female regular employees are concentrated at Grade 5 or lower, which is the same range occupied by part-timers.

The reason that female regular employees are a cost burden for businesses is not solely due to the perception that they are overpaid on regular employee salaries given that their job responsibilities overlap with those of part-timers. As a result of social and state concern regarding the drop in childbirth rates, the number of female regular employees who use institutional support for balancing work and family has increased dramatically. In the case of Company G1, until the latter half of the 1990s no more than 10 regular employees throughout the company worked reduced hours due to child-rearing responsibilities (they could reduce their workdays by a maximum of three hours, and their responsibilities were tied to a specified store and work schedule). By 2003, that number had risen to 99 and by 2006 to 184. The duration for which they worked reduced hours also increased, from stopping when children turned three, to stopping when they turned six; and from February 2007, this duration extended even to the time until children graduated from elementary school, with the result that the number rose to 243 by June 2007. The number of employees who took childcare leaves also increased, from 45 in 2003 to 260 in 2006. In addition, a new policy was implemented to allow employees temporarily to decline transfers (for a period of three years per suspension of transferability, with a maximum of three suspensions allowed) due to personal or family circumstances (nursing care or child rearing), and in 2005 the number of regular employees selecting this option numbered 452. In some cases, female regular employees who applied for reduced responsibilities due to childcare needs were persuaded to switch to part-timer status. However, given the increasing belief in society generally that institutional support for women balancing work and family constitutes a company’s social responsibility and that a worker’s reliance on such policies is a right, companies can resist only so far.

Nevertheless, female regular employees also create problems other than cost burden. That is to say, they diminish part-timers’ willingness to accept their less favorable treatment and thus damage the process of turning part-timers into main employees and integrating them into the company. The primary reason that part-timers accept less favorable treatment is that they are nontransferable and cannot work late shifts. However, the more they transform to become main employees, the less difference there is between their work conditions and those of regular employees, other than the issue of transferability. Moreover, an increasing number of companies have recently been requiring their part-time employees to switch their work hours. In this context, it is difficult for part-timers to tolerate the presence of regular employees who start work at 10 a.m. and leave at 4 p.m. For that reason, at stores with female regular employees who take advantage of support for balancing work and family, there are many complaints such as, ‘How dare she! She comes later and goes home earlier than we part-timers.
even though she’s a regular employee!’. It is difficult to expect workers to invest effort into developing new skills, or to devote themselves to the company, if they feel that they are being treated unfairly. For that reason, female regular employees are increasingly viewed by their companies as burdens.

4.2 The Positional Warfare and Unofficial Power of Conversational Communities

4.2.1 Resignation and Rationalization

For part-timers, the simultaneous progression of their transformation into the main workforce and the expansion of the salary gap mean that they are carrying out greater responsibilities at relatively lower wages than in the past. Presumably, few people would be satisfied with such a contradiction. According to my questionnaire, the satisfaction level of part-time employees who are homemakers is fairly low with respect to their wages. When comparing themselves with regular employees who perform the same tasks, the percentage of those who feel ‘my satisfaction level is low even taking into consideration the difference in hours worked’ is 64.5% for those who work 30 hours or more per week and 52.4% for those who work less than 30 hours.

However, even if these workers are dissatisfied, reality does not easily change. The majority of homemaker part-time employees have experienced an interruption to their careers as regular employees that resulted from their establishing a family. They accept their current situation with comments such as ‘That’s how it was back in those days’, or ‘If I were ten or 20 years younger, I’d like to work hard as a regular employee, but at this age...’ or ‘It would be the same if I switched to another workplace’, and they accordingly resign themselves that ‘it can’t be helped’ (shoganai). In addition, they evaluate their role as homemakers positively, observing that ‘my family exists as it does because I’ve done the right thing as a homemaker’, and rationalizing their choice to work part-time as ‘if a woman is going to balance family and work, working part-time seems to make the most sense’.

When resignation and rationalization are not enough to make it bearable, these employees tell themselves with mature generosity, ‘I’m going to do what I can to assist these young people whose future lies ahead of them’, or they think about their own children’s work life and try to view the regular employees with maternal protectiveness. They also console themselves with beliefs like ‘The regular employees also have all kinds of fees deducted from their salaries and their actual earnings aren’t all that great’, or ‘New hires make just about the same salary as I do’, and they view the treatment of regular employees as ‘sour grapes’. However, they are not entirely satisfied with their situation, and so they desire their daughters to lead a different kind of life. They advise their daughters, ‘Be sure you can support yourself even if you don’t get married’, and intent on saving enough for their daughters’ tuition fees, they persuade their husbands to let them work the better-paying late shift as part-timers. In this way, they attempt to affirm their reality. This is because even if they are dissatisfied with their current state, they can continue living precisely by accepting their choices. In particular, when they

3. According to the same questionnaire, 83.4% of homemaker part-time employees were regular employees before marriage, but then retired from the company either upon marriage or childbirth. Notably, of the female employees, approximately 20% are married, and of those only half have children. In other words, ‘regular employees are the past form of part-timers, and part-timers are the future form of regular employees’.

4. However, the kinds of part-timers who make such comparisons are those core part-timers who have been working for 10 years or more.
feel they are unable to change their lot in life, they receive strength by affirming their own lives. As a consequence, they are even able to change their preferences as necessary.5

4.2.2 The Construction of Unofficial Power and Self-preservation

Even when part-time employees who are homemakers resign themselves to their circumstances through rationalization, they still take strategic steps to protect their interests. This is because their situation is too hostile for them to commit themselves to it. Even as these women accept their basic reality, they make full use of a variety of resistive strategies.6 Among these strategies, the one we ought most closely to examine is the construction of unofficial power by cliques revolving around a leader called ‘the boss’ (bosu).7

(1) Autonomous cliques and their bosses.

Part-time employees, unlike regular employees, are nontransferable between stores or sales areas, but live near the stores where they work. In addition, they are highly settled.8 For these reasons, in the course of working at the same store for many years, they naturally form intimate cliques. In addition, when it comes to new stores, part-timers are recruited months beforehand to prepare for the opening, and therefore the cohesiveness among opening members is extremely powerful. They receive daily training together for two or three months, visit other stores together for observation and practicum and thus experience a high degree of comradeship that will not occur once the store opens.

The autonomous cliques of part-timers essentially are ‘conversational communities of middle-aged women (obasantachi no oshaberi kyōdōtai)’. These women eat together and gather at the store dining hall during breaks or on the way home after work, thus creating opportunities for conversation. Their relationships extend from bad-mouthing someone they dislike to coordinating their days off so they can go on outings together. These conversational communities allow the women to release the accumulation of workplace stress and to share information of all kinds.

In addition, when a clique is formed, it is natural that a leader will emerge whose words carry particular weight; management calls such leaders ‘the boss’. This appellation is extremely widespread, and the part-timers themselves also make common use of it. The reason that the regular employee managerial staff use such exaggerated terms as ‘boss’ and ‘subordinate’ (buka), as if alluding to a hierarchical organization, is that the women are much more difficult to manage as a collective than as individuals. In addition, the terms probably reflect the regular employees’ efforts to understand the cliques based on their own experience, since they themselves belong to a hierarchical organization.

5. Akerlof and Dickens (1992) discovered that male workers who perform dangerous tasks develop a conviction, out of a need to avoid damaging their self-esteem, that their jobs are not as dangerous as other people think. In other words, they feel that ‘[s]omeone as smart as me couldn’t possibly do something so dangerous’. As a result, the more experienced such a worker is, the more he tends to be dismissive about wearing safety gear.

6. It is difficult to conceive that unorganized individual actors would make use of resistive strategies that are entirely disconnected from their acceptance strategies, unless those strategies are decisive attempts to convert their power relations. During political revolutions, some individual actors spontaneously rush into the streets to set things ablaze. Yet the majority of them would have lived, until the very day before, internalizing their dissatisfaction and outwardly accepting the situations in which they were placed.

7. Other resistive strategies include bad-mouthing superiors, withholding effort and quitting the company.

8. For example, the average number of years homemaker part-timers work at Company G1 is 10 years, which is not much different from the number of years the company’s female employees work overall.
Of course, part-timers do not interact with each other on a completely horizontal basis. Part-timers who entered the company earlier are responsible for teaching those who enter afterwards, and sometimes this results in hierarchical relations between the teacher and the taught. It is inevitable that long-time workers and newer workers perceive the characteristics of a store and the work entailed at different levels and that this difference would lead to the creation of hierarchies. For that reason, there are cliques that center around vertical relationships. However, because these hierarchies are not supported by official policies, they are extremely fragile. Therefore, even if there are hierarchical differences within the cliques, they are impotent; what is central to these cliques is the intimacy of the relationships involved.

The characteristics of the people who become leaders in these conversational communities include the following: those who express their intentions clearly, are attentive to interpersonal relations, are highly skilled at their jobs, have worked a fair length of time and so on. This is because, if they are unaware of conditions at the store, or they are unskilled at their jobs, their words will carry no weight when they interact with regular employee managerial staff. In addition, these women tend to be union members. One of the crucial functions of the leaders is to report the opinions of clique members to superiors within the company organization; it is therefore necessary that even if they stand up to management on an issue, their words and actions do not lead to employment anxiety for the clique.9

(2) Positional warfare by conversational communities.

Conversational communities are not only units of intimacy but also units in a struggle for acknowledgment that allow community members to protect their interests by confirming with each other their position within the profit-making structure of the company and by compelling regular employee managerial staff to recognize that position. Because it is difficult for fixed-term part-time employees to confront management directly on an individual basis, they express their presence in the form of an informal clique. Part-timers stay for long periods at a particular store, and therefore their resistive activities can be viewed as analogous to ‘positional warfare’.

What part-timers most desire from management are the following three things: ‘awareness regarding the vital contributions of part-time workers’, ‘demonstrated attempts to communicate’ and ‘respectful treatment’. This is because, although part-timers are dissatisfied with their unfavorable treatment, they thoroughly understand that that is a structural problem that individuals cannot change immediately. Especially for that reason, they are extremely sensitive to attitudes regarding part-timers and to the fair assignment of work responsibilities.

Differences in treatment are not the only basis for the formation of unofficial power. Homemaker part-timers work for many years at one store and therefore develop a strong attachment to the store and its sales areas.10 In addition, because part-timers in essence have had the experience of being robbed of their names, reidentified as homemakers and confined to caring for their families, the workplace represents a space where they are recognized by their own names and their own abilities. For these women, then, the workplace is the object of a powerful self-identification. For that reason, they

9. According to an executive officer of Union S4, ‘The section heads are still young so when they argue with part-timers they sometimes wind up telling them not to bother coming the next day. But they can’t say something like that to a union member’. Generally speaking, union membership means greater job security. The stores have the authority to recruit and hire part-timers, but when part-timers join the union, the store cannot easily dismiss them.

10. When emergencies occur, such as if a student worker fails to show up for the night shift, the part-timers are the employees who arrive most quickly to fill in.
call their assigned store ‘my store’ (watashi no tenpo)\textsuperscript{11} and are convinced that they are better informed about it than regular employees, who are transferred from one store to another every two or three years. They are willing to put up with unfavorable treatment for the sake of the success of ‘my store’, but they cannot stand having their roles and contributions at the store denied.

Consequently, ‘bad-mouthing the section head at the store dining hall’ is an important daily activity of the conversational community. There are stages for bad-mouthing. Low-level bad-mouthing includes consoling each other within the conversational community by complaining to each other and thus venting one’s dissatisfaction. However, in cases when that is not enough, the next level involves ‘bad-mouthing the section head or a regular employee close to the section head from behind so they overhear the complaint’. In this way, complaints can be conveyed to the responsible party.

However, when this second level is inadequate for dealing with a situation, the conversational community’s positional warfare can escalate to ‘taming the section head’. In other words, the community refuses to harmonize with sales floor operations. Because personnel reviews of supermarket sales area section heads weight sales performance heavily, the cooperation of part-timers is undeniably crucial. A refusal by the conversational community to harmonize is thus an enormous blow for section heads. Sometimes the taming of a section head takes place as part of the breaking in of a newly arrived section head. This way, he is compelled to recognize the existence of the part-timers from the beginning, before any problems emerge.

Even when a conversational community tames the section head, the store manager will not step in until the problem becomes severe. For example, at one store all the employees know that when a new section head arrives at the fresh produce section, the part-timers of that section first take him to the refrigerator to break him in, and yet no one puts a stop to it. Not only that, but some of the employees even chuckle as they tell each other, ‘When are they going to take him over?’ or ‘Apparently this one came out crying too’. This is because there is nothing special about the process. Rather, it is a hurdle that must be cleared for the regular employee to make it as a section head. Furthermore, everyone understands that the women are doing it not out of spite, but simply because they wish to impress on the section head that, as part-timers with years of experience at the store, they know best about the place, that they are members of a core labor force performing roles vital to the success of the business and that they deserve appreciation.

The power struggle between the conversational community and the section head generally is settled through mutual acknowledgment, once a certain amount of time has passed. However, in the event that tensions are not resolved, leading to negative consequences for sales area operations, a third entity must intervene to bring about conciliation. In the worst cases, when mediation does not work out, someone is transferred. There are no set rules predetermining who would be transferred, but if the company were to try to transfer a regular employee it would have a domino effect at other stores. Therefore, more often than not the problem is settled within the store by transferring a part-timer. However, in cases when a section head is battling against the entire clique at an old store with many influential leaders, or at a particular workplace where the solidarity of the clique is unusually strong, or when a part-timer who is an assistant section head and a longtime employee is in conflict with the

\textsuperscript{11} It is nearly impossible to understand the desperation with which veteran part-timers worked at the ‘my store’ they were about to lose, due to the impending bankruptcy of their company, unless one takes into consideration the construction of how these workers self-identify with their stores.
section head, it is less troublesome for the company to transfer the section head even if he is not due for a regular transfer. If the intervention occurs too late, trouble may develop in the form of veteran part-timers quitting *en masse* or turning to a labor union outside the company. For that reason, it is more important to implement appropriate interventions and adjustments at a suitable moment than to decide who should be transferred.

When a part-timer rather than a regular employee is transferred, it is not necessarily the case that the part-timer has been defeated. If the part-timer is an influential leader of a conversational community, the part-timer herself might request a sales area transfer and thus pass along the responsibility and burden to the regular employee who denied the respect due to a veteran part-timer. Such a regular employee is seen as responsible for having destroyed the energetic atmosphere that formed the basis of the former solidarity of the sales area, and therefore he is expected to bear the burden of having affected its sales operations. In the case of mass quitting as well, the section head cannot be considered victorious given the damage and criticism he will face as a result. The section head, who is left behind, not only must struggle with sales floor operations for a considerable duration, but also will be unable to stay at the store for very long. Particularly when the competition is fierce, the section head will be greatly pressured by the possibility that the part-timers may decide to work for a competing company. Moreover, when part-timers join unions outside the company, the result is a heavier burden for the company.

As noted above, in their attempts to create solidarity through interaction with each other in cliques that form naturally, homemaker part-time employees at the supermarket branches struggle for acknowledgment while also resisting the contradictory circumstances under which they are simultaneously transformed into main workers and face an increasing salary gap. The result is the construction of these part-timers’ unofficial power in the workplace. In addition, the company’s response is, ‘It’s a hazard for us if skilled veteran part-timers quit’, and therefore, ‘It’s better if regular employees quit’. In other words, because these women are low-wage but highly trained workers, the company is forced to acknowledge their unofficial power. For that reason, the higher someone’s managerial position within the company, the more he engages in paying obeisance to part-timers that expresses appreciation but costs nothing. For example, when the president of the small and mid-sized regional companies makes the rounds of the company’s branches, the first place he stops by is not the store manager’s office. Rather, he heads for the sales areas and the back of the store, and having taken care to remember the names of respected bosses, he calls them by name, pats these part-time bosses on the shoulder, tells them to keep up the good work and shakes hands with them. Only after that does he make his way to the store manager’s office.

(3) The response of the company and its limited assimilation of part-timers.

The formation of part-time employees’ unofficial power is closely related to the process of transforming them into the main workers. This is apparent from the fact that the unofficial power of part-timers was stronger at the SMs than the GMSs until about the mid-1990s and that it was particularly strong in their fresh produce sales areas. The SMs were aggressive from early on about transforming part-timers into main employees because they primarily deal with foodstuffs. This means not only that they carry merchandise with a lower average unit price and profit rate than the GMSs but also that their merchandise has a high processing rate within the store. As is clear from the statement, ‘The biggest difference between GMS part-timers and SM part-timers is that GMS part-timers only need to be able to perform the tasks they’ve been assigned, whereas SM part-timers have to make decisions on their own while carrying out their assignments’, in the latter half of the 1990s when I began my survey, there was a significant difference between SMs and GMSs in terms of both the industry’s strategies to transform part-timers into core employees and the level to which that strategy
had succeeded. However, around the year 2000, a tremendous change took place in the attitude of GMS companies regarding the transformation of part-timers into main employees. The GMS industry had already reached the limits of its growth potential in the 1980s. The long-term economic downturn of the 1990s resulted in one bankruptcy after another of the major companies, and the very survival of this category of industry was in doubt. One of the responses devised by the GMS industry to transcend this threat was to increase the ratio of foodstuffs that attract customers, while also propelling the transformation of part-timers into core employees.

It must be noted that when a company is aggressive about transforming part-timers into core employees, there is the concern that their unofficial power in the workplace will expand, that the company’s official chain of command will deteriorate and that the profit-generating structure of the company will be destabilized. It therefore becomes necessary for the company to regulate the unofficial power of part-timers. This need constitutes the personnel management policy that I call ‘the limited assimilation mechanism’. In other words, although the workplace status and treatment of part-time employees improve based on ability, this policy is designed to maintain a narrower range of options for part-timers than for regular employees. If the treatment and opportunities for advancement for part-timers were equal to that of regular employees, it would defeat the original aim of using part-timers, which is to reduce costs. The company therefore tries to kill two birds with one stone by using the limited assimilation mechanism to ‘reduce costs and turn part-timers into main employees’. SM companies early on turned their part-timers into core employees, and because they confronted relevant issues earlier, by the latter half of the 1990s they had implemented limited assimilation mechanisms. GMS companies are currently following in their wake to implement these mechanisms.

5. Reformed Personnel Management Policies as Forms of Limited Assimilation

Finally, let us examine the changes brought about by the policy reforms with respect to how employees are treated based on their hiring classification, and consider whether the reforms will help the companies to indeed reduce costs and turn part-timers into main employees.

12. This can also be confirmed through the organizational sphere of the union member part-timers, which is closely linked to the industry’s strategy to turn part-timers into core employees. Until the early 2000s, the union for six of the GMSs surveyed in this study (i.e. all but Company G3, which due to internal reasons had early on started turning part-timers into core employees) organized nonregular employees only. For further details regarding the relationship between companies turning part-timers into core employees and unions organizing those employees, refer to Kim (2004: Chapter 5).

13. A section head at Company G4, which has not yet fully instituted a limited assimilation mechanism, stated as follows: ‘I think it would be good if we were to offer a wide range of hourly wages based on a part-timer’s skills... I decide each person’s work volume based on her abilities, but no matter what the part-timers express dissatisfaction... and raise the issue of fairness’. In addition, part-timers at the case study store Company G1 feel that the authority of regular employees has increased, subsequent to the policy reforms. They feel that regular employee superiors assign opportunities for advancement only to those part-timers with whom they are on close terms, and they have gathered numerous times outside the store in order to map out countermeasures.

14. This point is clear from the fact that it was in the SM stores that Company G1 introduced its part-time section head policy in 1999; it was only in 2004 that the policy was implemented in its GMS stores. It should also be noted that Company G1 was slower than other SM companies about introducing its part-time section head policy for SM stores, the reason being that Company G1 primarily runs GMS stores.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Employee classification</th>
<th>Wage pattern</th>
<th>Bonus</th>
<th>Retirement allowance</th>
<th>Contract period</th>
<th>Shift work</th>
<th>Transfers (5)</th>
<th>Work hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>N and R employee</td>
<td>D, M (1)</td>
<td>Five months</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>1920 per annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Former L employee</td>
<td>D, M</td>
<td>Four months/Two months (2)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>△</td>
<td>1920 per annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C employee M level</td>
<td>D, M</td>
<td>Four months</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Six months (3)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>△</td>
<td>1920 per annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C employee person in charge</td>
<td>D, M</td>
<td>Two months</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Six months</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>1920 per annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C employee person in charge</td>
<td>Hourly</td>
<td>One month</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Six months</td>
<td>△ (4)</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>149 or less per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>N and A employee</td>
<td>D, M</td>
<td>Five months</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>40 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E part-timer manager</td>
<td>D, M</td>
<td>Three months</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>△</td>
<td>37.5 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E part-timer person in charge</td>
<td>D, M</td>
<td>Two months</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>△</td>
<td>37.5 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P part-timer</td>
<td>Hourly</td>
<td>One month</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>32.5 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H part-timer</td>
<td>Hourly</td>
<td>One month</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>30 or less per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For wage pattern, D means daily and M means monthly; four months for management level and two months for person in charge; the contract period of the store manager is one year. In recent years, the work hours of homemaker part-time employees (currently 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.) have shifted greatly in response to the needs of sales areas—○ means transferable, △ means transfer without change of address and × means nontransferable.
Table 2 illustrates employee treatment at Companies G1 and S1, based on hiring classification and the conditions under which those employees work. The employees at these two companies can be divided into two large groups, depending on whether or not they can be transferred. That is, one group consists of transferable employees who have indefinite employment contracts and receive favorable treatment, while the other consists of nontransferable employees who have short-term contracts and receive unfavorable treatment. The nontransferring employees are fixed-term laborers either excluded from employee benefits represented by the retirement allowance, or if they qualify for benefits they receive lesser sums. Ultimately, the treatment of nontransferring employees, in a comparison with the former categories of regular and nonregular employees, is closer to that of nonregular employees. Stated differently, they have become ‘part-timers’.

Of course, managerial part-timers receive more favorable treatment than typical part-timers. However, let us investigate how many such part-timers there are among part-timers overall. As of August 2003, nearly 10 years after the introduction of the policy reforms, the percentage of E part-timers among Company S1’s part-time employees is 12.6% and the percentage of E part-timers who hold the position of section head or higher is about 5% of all part-timers, but nearly all these women are former regular employees. In addition, as of May 2007, three years after the reforms, C employees at level J2 or higher at Company G1 (analogous to E part-timers at Company S1) constitute 3.6% of part-timers overall (about 100,000 persons), even when including former L employees (2.3% when former L employees are excluded). Moreover, the number of people who have section head positions or higher is only 2,181 even when former L employees are included. Thus, they comprise only a tiny fraction of the assimilated yet limited part-timers.

Next, let us compare wages. Company G1 claims that it has designed its wage scale so that if N employees earn 100, R employees with the same qualifications and positions earn 95 and C employees at M level (J3-M3) earn 85. However, this wage comparison does not include various benefit allowances, retirement packages or company welfare fees. Moreover, as is clear from the statement, ‘When former L employees fail to advance to M job class within three years, their salary drops,’ the wages of Company G1’s M level C employees are lower than that of L employees who prior to the policy reforms held the same position and rank. The wages of J2 rank C employees are also lower than that of the former ‘Career employee’ whose position is analogous to the current J2 rank. In addition, J1 level C employees constitute 90% of C employees, but the wages of former F part-timers who have become J1s have seen no changes, whether in terms of monetary amount or wage structure. As a result of policy reforms, workers are now performing the same labor for less favorable treatment, and companies are now able to implement broad cost reductions.

At Company S1, the predefined work hours of E part-timers are 7.5 hours per day, but especially in the case of section manager or higher, their actual work hours are not different from those of regular

15. However, when I met former L employees (female, section heads) two years after the reforms, they declared that they had no interest in advancement. According to them, ‘If we don’t take the promotion tests, we have to submit a written apology, so we show up at the test site but we go without preparing for the exam, and we just sit there whiling away the time until it’s time to go home’. They also noted that ‘[n]early all of the L employees at the stores are married women, and as for the unmarried women they live with their elderly parents’. The biggest reason these women reject advancement, they state, is that ‘[w]hen you enter the M job class, there’s no longer a concept of the fixed working hours, and the intensity of work becomes overwhelming for those of us who have a family to look after’. Furthermore, they add, ‘We first elected to become L employees because no other options were available to us, and just because the policy has changed doesn’t mean that our circumstances will change’.

Personnel Management Reforms in Japanese Supermarkets

197
employees. The director of the human resource department of Company S1 said that E part-timers are paid a wage that is 80% of regular employees who have the same status, which means that ‘the burden of transfers is compensated at 20%’. However, managerial part-timers, the majority of whom are former regular employees, already experienced a drop in wages when they converted to part-timer status, and therefore their bonuses and other benefits are much less. As a result, the annual salaries of E part-timers are no more than ‘60–65% of regular employees’ holding equivalent positions. In addition, even if they attain a higher position, the difference does not shrink. For example, the annual salary of a particular E part-timer store manager (a woman in her 50s who was converted from a regular employee and who is managing her third store) in Company S1 earned 27% less than the lowest paid regular employee store manager. She also earned 40% or less than the regular employee store managers who managed stores the same size as hers (figures based on annual wages from 2002).

Essentially, then, under the policy reforms, even part-timers can expect improved treatment and higher positions as their skills increase, but that treatment is not equal to what regular employees receive for the same work. That is why I term this a ‘limited assimilation mechanism’ that is being applied to part-timers. Moreover, as a result of policy reforms, because workers receiving less favorable treatment are performing the same tasks as before, the effect of cost reductions for the company doubles.

6. Conclusion
In this paper, I presented an analysis of how the personnel management policies of Japan’s major supermarket companies, which advocate ‘treatment based on work conditions instead of employment arrangements’, constitute a limited assimilation mechanism that attempts to transform part-timers into main employees at less favorable degrees of treatment than regular employees. However, the flip side of the limited improvement in treatment experienced by a portion of the part-timers is a deterioration in treatment experienced by female employees with family responsibilities. If that is the case, then the policy reforms surely must be understood as attempts to ‘balance’ employee treatment using family responsibilities as the standard for classification.

What the revised policies use as a basis for work conditions is the parameter of transferability. Certainly, in a democratic state the freedom to change one’s residence is a fundamental right of citizenship. However, in Japan, where gender-based divisions of labor constitute policy for the maintenance of society rather than merely serving as a norm (Ōsawa 2007), who are those workers who are able to fly off from Hokkaido to Okinawa immediately on receipt of a letter of appointment? At Company S1, employees who start off as part-timers do not advance to managerial positions. Instead, these female former regular employees, who were forced to convert their employee arrangements due to family responsibilities, comprise the majority of managerial part-timers. We must view this as a case of the company discovering opportunities in ‘comprehensively turning employees with family responsibilities into part-timers’. These kinds of personnel management policies on the part of the major supermarkets may have weakened notions of differential status based on employment arrangements, but they expose and reinforce the gender-based differences in status that adhere to the underside of employment arrangements. In addition, the realities spawned by the policies vividly illustrate the fact that as long as the model of ‘the man as primary breadwinner’ continues to govern the labor market, it will be an enormous challenge to bring fairness to the labor market.

Funding
Korea Research Foundation Grant funded by the Korean Government (MOEHRD, Basic Research Promotion Fund) (KRF-2005-H00002).
References


Management and Coordination Agency (Sōmushō), Statistics Bureau (Tōkeikyoku). Rōdōryoku Chōsa (Labor Force Survey). Annual publication.


